

Beata Świtek, *Reluctant Intimacies: Japanese Eldercare in Indonesian Hands*

New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, xvi+226 pages. List of illustrations, acknowledgements, bibliography, index, 2 maps, 10 figures. Hardback \$90.00. ISBN: 978-1-78533-269-2 (hardback); 978-1-78533-270-8 (eBook).

In *Reluctant Intimacies*, Beata Świtek provides a compelling look at the lives of Indonesian eldercare workers in Japan. In doing so, she makes an important contribution to advancing understandings of various aspects of contemporary Japanese society, including the plight of smaller foreign communities, the problems associated with Japan's healthcare system as it deals with a rapidly aging population, and Japanese-foreigner relations more broadly. *Reluctant Intimacies* ethnographically examines the implementation of "Economic Partnership Agreements" with Indonesia, which recruit Indonesians to work in Japan and care for the nation's rapidly aging population. Świtek situates her research within a larger context of discourses concerning Japanese identity and how essentialist notions of national identity are problematized by Japan's realities on the ground (12–29). This is a useful approach since historic constructions of Japanese identity that portray Japan as "homogenous" and "monoethnic" are becoming increasingly challenged by the growing presence of foreigners within Japan's borders.

The data presented in the book comes from Świtek's experiences conducting ethnographic research at several eldercare facilities within Japan. She uses "avatars," whose "actions and experiences are amalgamations of what really happened to a greater number of real-life caregivers" (29) in order to protect the identities of her informants. Świtek notes that she also drew upon research conducted with former eldercare workers who had since returned to Indonesia and on visits to eldercare facilities there (31). Rather than conducting a grounded ethnographic study in one location, Świtek explains that she instead conducted "circular ethnography" by visiting several different facilities on a regular basis rather than just one (33).

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Reluctant Intimacies* is that fact that Świtek provides highly nuanced vignettes into the lives of her "avatar" interlocutors and highlights important details about their experiences in Japan. The book discusses many germane issues such as the recruitment of Indonesian eldercare workers in Indonesia, Indonesians' disappointments and hardships living in Japan and learning Japanese, how Indonesians perceive of their lack of responsibility and their lack of trust by their Japanese employers and patients, and how Indonesians formed relationships with their Japanese patients and colleagues, amongst other topics.

The rich ethnographic information Świtek provides is one of the book's greatest strengths and forms one of the most important ways that *Reluctant Intimacies* contributes to advancing understandings of foreign communities in Japan. This ethnographic data allows for a very interesting insight into the lives of Indonesian eldercare workers in Japan. That being said, the book could have also benefitted from more ethnographic data. Given the urgency of understanding the issues faced by such foreign communities, I believe the book could have included another chapter or two that focused on more aspects of Indonesian's lives in Japan. For example, it would have been interesting to know more about topics such as the daily lives of the Indonesian workers, more about their relationships—intimately and socially—with Japanese and other foreigners, and the ways Indonesians form communities within Japan to deal with some of the issues that emerge within their communities. Additionally, it would

have been interesting and elucidating to have learned how these eldercare workers engage with other Indonesians in Japan who do not work in the eldercare sector. Świtek broaches some these topics in the book, but there is certainly more to be uncovered on these issues in the future.

Świtek makes the point that the encounters between Japanese (both eldercare patients and care workers) and Indonesians are to some extent reshaping the ways that relationships develop between the two parties. In Chapter 2, Świtek explains that Japanese and Indonesians were able “to form meaningful and intimate interpersonal relationships” (71), which had lasting implications for how Japanese and Indonesians conceptualized of their experiences engaging each other. Some Japanese eldercare patients initially refused to be seen by Indonesian workers but eventually changed their minds, which resulted in stronger cross-cultural relations (80–81). While not all the encounters between Japanese and Indonesians developed positively, Świtek explains that “more intimate relationship could serve mutual learning and the formation of nuanced understandings” (91) in ways that foster interpersonal and intercultural relations.

Additionally, Świtek addresses topics such as larger debates surrounding national healthcare policies and accompanying discourses surrounding the importation of eldercare, how the lack of respect Indonesians felt in Japan caused them to leave Japan, the fluctuating meanings of “Indonesian” and “Japanese” within this volatile context, how Japan has sought to accommodate Indonesians’ Muslim beliefs, and what implications the presence of Indonesians have on Japanese society. Świtek dedicates significant attention to the media coverage of Indonesian eldercare workers and explains how the Japanese media has conceptualized the Indonesian presence (Chapter 3). This casts an important light on how Japanese press coverage has framed the arrival of these Indonesians and the perceived importance of their presence and work in Japan.

The book also makes an important contribution to demonstrating the multifaceted ways that Japanese-foreigner relations develop in this current context. Much of the literature on foreign communities in Japan has heretofore focused on the ways Japanese society marginalized Otherness, exhibits racist and xenophobic attitudes towards outsiders, and reinforces essentialist notions of ethnonational identity at the expense of foreigners’ rights. While these are important topics not to be overlooked, it is also important to understand that these dimensions form only a fragment of the larger picture and that behind these problematics are in fact other, more neutral and sometimes even positive, ways that foreigners and Japanese carve out relations with one another. Świtek provides excellent insight into the more multifaceted ways Japanese-foreigner relations develop and explains what implications these relations have for the future of Japanese-foreigner relations more broadly.

Reluctant Intimacies makes an important contribution to furthering understandings of foreign communities in Japan and provides a fresh perspective from which foreigner-Japanese relations can be conceptualized. This book will be useful for anyone interested in foreign communities in Japan but will also be of interest to migration scholars, policy specialists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and those interested in contemporary Japanese society more generally.

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